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The growing move to unleash the CIA

BY LAWRENCE MARTIN

Globe and Mail Correspondent

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THE SENATE Intelligence Committee recently held hearings on a proposed new charter for the Central Intelligence Agency.

The charter had been under fire for being too lenient on the CIA and now it was the turn of members of the American Civil Liberties Union to address it.

To no one's surprise, they started going ape. But before they got too far Delaware Senator Joe Biden raised his hands.

"Let me tell you something, fellows," he said. "The folks don't care. The average American couldn't care less right now about any of this. . . . You keep talking about public concern (about the CIA). There ain't none."

The civil liberties boys scoffed, but Senator Biden was not far off the mark. In the United States a profound attitudinal shift has taken place on the subject of the CIA. Whereas only three and four years ago the agency was being whipped and ridiculed, today it is being stroked and countenanced.

Swept up in the winds of war (however faint) the public and its legislators seem intent on ushering in a new age of permissiveness for the agency.

With the Iranian and Afghanistan crises still on the table, with a growing domestic perception that the country is weak, the feeling generally is that the CIA should cut the curtsying and get down to the dirty work.

This doesn't mean the public is prepared to condone the agency sending foreign leaders poisoned packs of tiparillos (Castro, 1960) or devising plans to place exploding sea shells where leaders skin-dive (Castro, 1963). And it doesn't mean G. Gordon Liddy should be put in

State of the Union address — "We need to remove unwarranted restraints on America's ability to collect intelligence".

It was only a while back that the restraints were put on because it was felt they were warranted. Now they are being removed because it is felt they are unwarranted. To wit, the number of CIA oversight committees in Congress is being scaled down from eight to two. The power of the two committees is being diminished so they no longer have the right to be informed of controversial CIA operations before or even when they are happening. The ban on the CIA's use of journalists, clergymen and academics for covert operations has been lifted. And a bill that would largely exempt the CIA from the Freedom of Information Act appears to have enough support in both houses to pass.

More important than visible changes are the unwritten ones. "There is an understanding now," said a Justice Department official, "and it comes to the CIA from the Administration. It is that if there is some tough work to be done, then do it."

When he campaigned in 1976, Jimmy Carter spoke out against "the veils of secrecy" in Washington and Walter Mondale, his running mate, promised more reform of the CIA to bring it into line. New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan remembers early in this Administration when Mr. Mondale appeared at a meeting and scolded intelligence officials bent on relaxing CIA restrictions.

"The Vice-President looked sternly at the four wretches assembled and said, 'You fellows don't

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